



Gumbo Ya-Ya: A Collection of Louisiana Folk Tales by Lyle Saxon; Edward Dreyer; Robert Tallant

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California Folklore Quarterly, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Jul., 1946), pp. 317-319

Published by: [Western States Folklore Society](#)

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Gumbo Ya-Ya: A Collection of Louisiana Folk Tales. Compiled by Lyle Saxon, Edward Dreyer, Robert Tallant. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1945. Pp. xiii + 581. \$5.00)

New Orleans seems to have developed, lately, into the American mass-production center of quaint legends, and this Louisiana Writers' Project volume enthusiastically furthers the trend. To quote the jacket blurb, which for once is no more flamboyant than the text, "It has the nostalgia of a blues song, the immediacy of a tabloid, and the literary quality of the best folk poetry." The subtitle, it should be said, is misleading; the book is not a collection of Louisiana folk tales. It is more homely than that. It is a real *gumbo ya-ya*. What is a *gumbo ya-ya*? Listen:

"Elderly Creole ladies were fond of gathering at each other's houses to spend the day. All the gossip would be exchanged, family histories combed through, the actions of this person or that discussed. . . . Such a gathering of women was known, scornfully, as a *gumbo ya-ya*" (pp. 172-173).

The atmosphere of the gossip session prevails throughout and contributes greatly to the artistic consistency of the work, a consistency which exists in spite of the wide variety of reporting styles employed in presenting a rather heterogeneous body of subject matter. The excellent photographs with which the volume is illustrated are prevailingly of the "candid" variety.

If the aim of the compilers, Lyle Saxon, Edward Dreyer, and Robert Tallant, was to present a picture of New Orleans and vicinity according to the canons of surrealism, they have succeeded. The impression of the city this reviewer gets from *Gumbo Ya-Ya* is one of morbidity tinged with madness. Not that all the characters in the book are morbid or mad; most of them are normal enough. But, in adhering to the *gumbo ya-ya* style, those responsible for the book have forced themselves to select for consideration mainly the seamy side.

Purely contemporary essays are interspersed with historical ones and with collections of songs and street cries. The result is hodgepodge, but structured hodgepodge. The opening chapter deals with the Negro celebration of Mardi Gras, the second with street criers, the third with the now-vanished "Irish Channel" section of the city, which "was just a real cosmopolitan neighborhood, except for a few Italians."

The next section, called "the Axeman's Jazz," is perhaps typical of the book. It is the history, well documented, of an episode in New Orleans' recent past as macabre as anything that could have happened in any city. It seems there was an axe-murderer who used to chop panels out of locked doors, crawl through the resultant small openings, and chop panels out of his sleeping victims' heads. After the Axeman had gone through this ghastly routine several times the entire city was frightened and hysterical. Then appeared an advertisement in the form of a letter to the editor of the *Times-Picayune*, signed by "The Axeman," saying, in part: "I am very fond of jazz music, and I swear by all the devils in the nether regions that every person shall be spared in whose home a jazz band is in full swing at the time I have just mentioned. . . . One thing is certain and that is that some of those people who do not jazz it on Tuesday night (if there be any) will get the axe" (p. 86). The response was what might have been predicted. No city has ever seen another such night of red-hot jive as ensued on that night in March, 1919. At least, it was enough to satisfy the Axeman, for no attack occurred.

Chapters follow on Saint Joseph's Day and Saint Rosalia's Day, with emphasis on Italian observances. Then a chapter on the lottery and Negro beliefs concerning lucky numbers, followed by a historical study of the Creole aristocracy and their fate. Next the reader is taken to the bayous, for a short visit with the thrifty and industrious Cajuns, only to be whisked back to the outskirts of the city for a view of ancient Mother Rita in the rickety Temple of Innocent Blood, with pigs in the baptismal pool and a hideous statue of Jehova God in the courtyard.

Two chapters, "The Plantations" and "The Slaves," present gossipy studies of the past. Following them is an account of buried treasure and some of the attempts that have been made to find it. This leads, somewhat logically, into a discussion of Louisiana ghosts, of which there are many, then into a chapter on funeral customs among New Orleans Negroes, and finally to a lurid descriptive piece about the city's cemeteries, with particular emphasis on the All Saints' Day observances.

The chain of morbidity, running through all of these, becomes less apparent in the next chapter—about ghosts, magic, and ordinary life among the Negroes of the river front—and almost vanishes when we move from there to the Paillet Lane Negro settlement in the heart of New Orleans, where there are five churches and innumerable dump piles and junk yards. We stay in this contemporary vein through the next section, dealing with Mother Shannon, who prays, preaches, heals, and prophesies in the vigorous manner befitting a three-hundred-pound leader in the Spiritualist Church of the Southwest.

The Sockserhause Gang, once inhabiting the German section of New Or-

leans and now existing only in memory, provides lusty material for the next chapter. It is followed, somewhat surprisingly, by a collection of some of the songs that are, or were, sung by the various groups discussed. The last three chapters are short bits about the Negro chimney sweeps, about the tribulations of a Negro couple, and about a Black Hand killing. Appendices dealing with superstitions, colloquialisms, and customs conclude the book.

It is unfortunate that the music of the street cries and the songs was not included. In these advanced days there is little excuse for palming off a series of rhymes as a song when no indication is given as to how the song actually sounds.

As can be gathered from this summary, *Gumbo Ya-Ya* has some of the characteristics of a five-ring circus. It is breathtaking and bewildering, full of tarnished tinsel and soiled bright colors; it makes no particular sense, yet it leaves one with an almost purely emotional impression of high excitement. It is a disturbing, frequently an annoying, book. For example, the transitions between chapters, between paragraphs, even between sentences, are all wrong—usually, in fact, none exist, and the reader bumps and jars at dizzy speed from one topic to another—yet the wrongness is so consistent and has such cumulative effect that it becomes an art-style in itself. *Gumbo Ya-Ya* makes no discernible contribution to orthodox folklore, yet folklorists will feel at home with it because it presents so successfully those people from whom folklore is collected. And, as an experiment in method, it is worth reading.

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RICHARD ALAN WATERMAN

American Sayings: Famous Phrases, Slogans and Aphorisms. By Henry F. Woods. (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1945. Pp. ix + 310. \$2.50)

Mr. Woods divides his collection into four parts—"Political and Civil," "War," "Sociological-Economic-Commercial," and "Popular." There are about three hundred entries altogether, and they include most of the more esteemed and familiar apothegms, adages, saws, bywords, shibboleths and battle cries of the American people. William L. Marcy's "To the victor belongs the spoils" is there, and also Lincoln Steffens' characterization of Philadelphia as "corrupt and contented"; the Rev. Samuel D. Burchard's "rum, Romanism and rebellion," and Henry Ford's "History is bunk"; Lincoln's "with malice toward none, with charity for all," and Coolidge's "I do not choose to run"; Henry Clay's "I would rather be right than be President," and Thomas R. Marshall's "What this country really needs is a good five-cent cigar."

All these, of course, are to be found in a dozen other dictionaries of phrases and quotations, but Mr. Woods has made some effort to reinforce them with